2015

"Growing Together: Cross pollinating Bio- and community food politics at Czech gardens"

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On a breezy April afternoon on the outskirts of Prague, an eclectic mix of community organizers, pensioners, and young parents came together to share food and to celebrate the opening the Vidimova Community Garden. Hosted by Kokoza, a five year-old NGO dedicated to fostering eco-friendly activities throughout the Czech Republic, the event was covered by local news media and carefully choreographed to be part mixer, part promotion.

Founded in 2014, the Vidimova garden's first season was only a modest success. Though Prague 11 is home to over 70,000 Czechs, Vidimova boasted just five members its first year. Now, all under of the watchful eye of a television crew, dozens of parents gaily bantered over carefully tended campfires in the center of the garden while children cycled through workshops hosted by Kokoza volunteers. By the end of the evening, even the youngest attendees had learned to sort recyclables, plant flowers, and make their own vermicomposters. As guests trickled out, children were encouraged to take stickers exhorting them to "maintain the food cycle!" while adults were invited become full-time members of the garden for a modest 300 crown fee. By the time Vidimova's gates closed for the night, garden membership had increased five-fold.

Afterwards, I asked one organizer why so many Czechs seemed interested in the garden as compared to last year. "It seems to me that the recent trend, or the fashion" Daniel said, "is that people opt to pay more for food that is supposedly better quality. The demand for growing food in community gardens is part of the same trend...People are interested because they're community-oriented, but also because of the food itself."

Daniel's observation suggests ideas about food quality and the importance of community are converging in Czech gardens, growing together in ways that conflate the cultivation of civil

society with the conscientious production and consumption of quality foods within the local community. While gardens like Vidimova have blossomed in the last decade, other traditional horticultural spaces from the socialist period like colony gardens-- peri-urban commons containing many individual allotments—have been decimated by metropolitan redevelopment. Once the destination of "internal immigration" away from

Since the mid-1990's the number of colony gardens in Prague has been cut in half, most sold to developer, waiting lists for the few remaining gardens grow longer every year (Gibas et al 2013**).** Jirina, a retired office worker and current member of the Vidimova garden summed up the situation succinctly:

> Under socialism, most people grew, since we just had a few options for . Then we started to import goods…and developers started to buy up land allotments, so people couldn't grow. After socialism people stopped growing vegetables, fruits, and there were only ornamental gardens…today, the wealthy have pleasure gardens, simply because they believe what a man grows himself is good, whereas what is in the stores is poor.

Drawing upon my three months of ethnographic fieldwork in two community gardens—Vidimova, on the southern outskirts of Prague, and Prazelenina in the city center– I argue that these spaces have partially supplanted colony gardens in the Czech Republic because they operate as sites of what I term "ideological cross-pollination". By this, I mean spaces where emergent ideas about food quality symbiotically support gardeners' participation in civil society. These two gardens, although similar in their synthesis of food and politics, do have a few key differences however which I will address.

I draw upon Counihan and Siniscalchi's concept of *food activism* here to characterize the overt and covert forms of engagement and resistance practiced by gardeners at these sites, whose goals range from the top-down transformation of urban food systems to small-scale

circumventions of industrial agriculture, GMO's and pesticides (Counihan and Sinichalchi, 2013). While some forms of food activism in these gardens align with Smith and Jehlicka's concept of "quiet sustainability," (2013) other elements, particularly the workshops, media promotion, and communitarianism of the NGO-sponsored Vidimova fall into a category of more over activism that cannot be called quiet. Expanding upon Veblen's notion of "conspicuous consumption," I argue that actors' participation in and promotion of community gardens in Prague operates as a sort of "conspicuous production," valorizing community gardening as a politically responsible pastime while simultaneously currying cultural capital by eschewing capitalist modes of production (Veblen 1899).

Questions of Quality

Food quality—and precisely what "quality" means in postsocialist contexts—have become hotly debated topics in the last five years as the Czech middle class seeks new culturally appropriate outlets for their annually increasing purchasing power. For some, Bio-certification—the European equivalent of "Organic"—is thought to be a rough index of quality, but many Czechs remain skeptical of Bio- goods designated for eastern markets. As one of my interlocutors elaborated,

> Quality means food that doesn't contain chemicals and isn't cheap…the Germans have dual warehouses where they keep what goes to the west and what goes to the Eastern markets . . . when I find any product that is intended only for the Eastern market, with ingredients listed just in Slovakian or Hungarian or Czech . . . I don't buy it, because to me it's clear that it's simply poor in quality. But when a product is going to England or Italy, I'll buy it because I know . . . [the Germans] cannot afford to give Western Europeans such crap.

Catering to Czech's simultaneous skepticism of Western Europeans quality regulation and their desire for chemical-free foods, their farmer's markets and local grocery stores like Sklizeno have since sprouted in Prague, Brno, and other major Czech cities hawking locally-sourced Bio-

products. At the same time, television programs like "Peklo na talíři" or "Hell on a Plate" interrogate the provenance, production, and quality of many commonly available "health" foods in Czech stores, gleefly dishing dirt up on disingenuous products while demystifying the benefits of "Bio" for conscientious Czech consumers. As Harper illustrated in her article "Activist or Consumers?" consumer citizenship has long held allure for Central and Eastern European survivors of socialism, and consuming Bio-certified foods, and Western European foods in particular, is a perhaps a conspicuous way to indicate class status and political awareness, requisites for successful citizens of the new state (Harper 1999). Still, Bio-certification endures as an ambiguous signifier for many, and the price of food itself is often taken as a calque for quality. As one Czech woman related to me, "Bio doesn't mean better, but we buy it anyway."

Prazelenina

In Prazelenina, the first garden where I conducted fieldwork, conspicuous food activism and consciousness raising like that at Vidimova's opening day were conspicuously absent. Instead, Prazelenina serves as a site for more or less quiet community food production that simply sought to provide individual families a green social space to grow small amounts of chemical-free food and for children to play. Seen as "a bit hipsterish" compared to other, more overtly political agriculture projects in Prague, Prazelenina nevertheless stands as a site of quiet food activism and civil society for some.

Sitting on a promontory in the Holesovice neighborhood and surrounded on three sides by the Vlatava River, the former industrial hub was inundated by extensive flooding in 2002. Holesovice, described by one of Prazelenina's members as "quite gypsy, with filth and shit everywhere" prior to the floods, has since become a nexus for developers and a site of rapid gentrification. Originally the pet project of an environmentalist architect, Prazelenina is currently a collectively governed institution including many Western European and American

expatriates. As one of the few community gardens in Prague funded solely through membership dues, organization coordinators are free to operate without the entanglements of corporate sponsorship. The cost of this independence, however, is a 700 Czk annual membership pricetag, prohibitively expensive for most long-term residents of the neighborhood.

The net result is that Praguers and expats with substantial economic means, many of whom are recent transplants to the Prague 7 area, have found common ground with each other, while many socioeconomically marginal Czechs in the area, lacking ready access to healthy foods, have been left behind. Still, the garden is seen as a progressive movement by most of its members. For new parents in particular, Prazelenina represented a safe, green space for their children to play, well away from the perceived litter and decrepitude of the surrounding neighborhood.

Vidimova

In contrast, Vidimova and other Kokoza-sponsored gardens are sites of conspicuous production and overt ecological activism. Funded by a 100,000 czk T-Mobile grant, the Vidimova Community Garden sits on a municipal authority lot rented for the symbolic cost of one crown per meter per year. Operated in concert by Kokoza managers, local volunteers, and a few paid garden supervisors, the site is steeped in politics and enmeshed in a delicate political equilibrium. On its webpage, Kokoza is explicitly defined as a "social enterprise," dedicated to promoting composting and urban gardening initiatives that will "directly encourage the sharing of experiences and the development of civil society" (Kokoza.cz) On the ground, Kokoza must navigate the often conflicting desires of community organizers and individual gardeners.

As Katerina, the garden coordinator at Vidimova related, Kokoza organizers initially envisioned the garden would be more than "just a space where people come to grow tomatoes." NGO organizers wanted gardens to be laboratories of ecological activism, and sites for

workshops where communities would come together around the maintenance of the urban food cycle.

In practice, this proved much more difficult to realize. “My experience is that people are much more interested in just growing food than doing things together,” She explained. “Unless [you’re] sort of pushing people into these situations, they won't communicate that much. I think [community building] is a good thing, but I don't want to force anyone just to say we have a community.”

Politically active community gardens can also participate in subtle and inadvertent forms of exclusion, creating selective definitions of community that place certain actors more centrally in imaginaries of emerging civil society. On the metro ride back from the garden one day, I asked Kokoza’s director, Lucie, what made Kokoza’s gardens and supporters different from others in Prague. “There are only two types of gardens here,” she told me “ones like Kokoza—community gardens where it’s about community—and gardens where it’s more like a service. At Prazelenina it costs more because you are paying for a service.” Confused, I asked her where she thought colony gardens fell in this binary.

“Well actually colony gardens don’t fit, don’t fall into either model,” she confessed. “And that is something we are working on now but it’s quite hard. It’s at the top of the to-do list, but it seems to always be at the top of the to-do list. We’re trying to find a way to reach them, but it’s tough and we don’t have time. It’s hard to foster cooperation between us and them.” Lucie’s allusion to the broadening gulf between community and colony gardeners evinces the vanguardism of certain activist projects in Prague. In the case of Vidimova, gardeners participating in quiet sustainability projects—independent, unheralded, and unasked for—were imagined as unreachable and outside of the emerging civil society Kokoza sought to produce. In

this context, gardeners' intent disinterest in community building and their focus upon simply continuing to grow food can be seen as perhaps another form of food activism, one which uses the pretense of private horticulture to evade political recruitment.

Conclusion

While compensating for food scarcity is no longer the primary motivation for most gardeners in Prague, many still imagine growing their own food as a way to protect themselves from food contamination, poor quality, and suspect Bio-foodstuffs designated for Eastern European markets. Still, the net effect of many community gardening projects remains to be seen. The disconnect between Czechs' quiet and conspicuous food activism points to a broadening gulf between the quiet food activism of already socioeconomically marginal citizens and the visible activism of Czechs with time, know-how, and connections to NGO's. For some, it's also a way to presence particular class identity and political sensibilities. For others, a way to gain access to green spaces previously eroded by urban redevelopment. Community gardening is entangled in an array of food activisms which cultivate civil society, curry cultural capital, and engage in conspicuous production for political and personal gain. Thus, Czech community gardens are nurseries for seeds, children, and ultimately a particular imagining and reimagining of civil society that has the potential for different types of social exclusion.

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